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For Vietnam War orphans, a bittersweet return home War orphans return to a land they never knew

By [Dianna Marder](#) **INQUIRER STAFF WRITER**

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Get out your handkerchiefs and warm up the VCR.

At 5 p.m. Sunday, WHY-TV (Channel 12) will show Precious Cargo, a one-hour documentary for PBS about Vietnamese adoptees returning to their homeland on the 25th anniversary of the April 1975 fall of Saigon.

It's a keeper.

The film, from award-winning producer Janet Gardner of Princeton, focuses on eight adoptees and shows their bittersweet return to the maternity hospitals and orphanages where they were left as babies.

Among them is Todd Adamson, abandoned at the Sacred Heart Orphanage in Danang and adopted by a Harleysville, Pa., couple when he was 2 1/2. In a twist that defines serendipity, Todd meets and falls in love with another adoptee on the trip. Adamson, 31, will marry Jennifer Arias, 28, on Saturday.

Adamson's story is especially touching because nuns and nurses at Sacred Heart urged his adoptive parents, Marilyn and David Adamson, to choose a different child because Todd had polio. The Adamsons were shown pictures of five other healthy orphans. But by then, they said, they'd come to think of Todd, whom they'd only seen in pictures, as "their son" and would not reject him because of his illness.

On the trip to Vietnam in April 2000, Adamson realized, he said, how fortunate he was to have been taken to the United States - if only for the medical care. All he knows of his biological heritage is that he is the son of an American GI and a Vietnamese woman. His name at birth was Truong Thang.

He was brought here as part of Operation Baby Lift, a rescue effort by the U.S. government during the fall of Saigon. President Gerald Ford allocated \$2 million to airlift 2,000 orphans - many of them biracial, some malnourished and disabled. As one horrendous scene in Precious Cargo shows, the first flight out crashed soon after takeoff, killing about 150 of the 330 adults and children on board.

Many Vietnamese criticized Operation Baby Lift for removing children from their culture, and in some 200 cases it was later disclosed that the birth parents had not legally relinquished their children. The adoptees in Precious Cargo face this head-on in the form of animosity from officials they visit at the War Remnants Museum in Vietnam.

Parents who adopted foreign-born children, especially biracial babies, were pioneers in the 1970s. The Adamsons also adopted a Vietnamese girl, six months younger than Todd.

"When I was growing up, adoption like that was not so common," Todd Adamson said in a recent interview. "People made fun of how I looked, but I was raised to turn the other cheek and walk away."

He learned to ask the would-be tormentors, "What makes you think you're better?" And instead of getting into fights, he said, "I made friends with them that way."

Today he's tall and thin with a strong jaw and an ever-so-slight limp. Still, he is strong enough to work in the construction trade.

Even before he and the other adoptees left the Los Angeles airport for the trip to Vietnam, Adamson felt drawn to Arias, who has an equally harrowing survivor's story.



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Found on the doorstep at Queen of Peace orphanage in Saigon, she was named Phuong Hong Lan by the nuns. Gardner's documentary shows Arias returning to the orphanage and playing with children there. Adamson says he knew he was in love when he saw her response to the children.

The adoptees, raised in relative affluence and comfort in the United States, were clearly struck by the overcrowding and poverty, as well as the natural beauty of Vietnam. Adamson said the trip made him see what his life might have been like if he had stayed in Vietnam.

"I love my [adoptive] parents dearly," he said. "They did wonders for me."

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